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Responding To Europeans' Nuclear Fears

The Reagan administration's worries over our European allies' "pacifism" in the face of Soviet aggression are matched by the allies' concern over the Reagan administration.

The Europeans are nervous about what they consider America's traditional amateurism in foreign affairs generally. In addition, the allies are upset by President Reagan's failure to formulate a comprehensive Middle East policy, and his administration's apparent hostility to international organizations.

One issue on which the Reagan administration is showing increased sensitivity to European concerns is nuclear arms negotiations with the Soviet Union. Just as more and more Americans object to nuclear power plants in their backyard, so Europeans are frightened by the 55,000 NATO nuclear weapons in their midst and an equally awesome arsenal in the Soviet bloc.

A measure of this concern is the Swiss program requiring a fully equipped fallout shelter for every home and public building. Such wholesale precautions are beyond

the means of other European countries, so their people are demanding that their governments do something to halt the nuclear arms race.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon has decided to keep a low profile on its nuclear command exercise, "Ivy League '82," scheduled for March 1.

According to a secret Pentagon briefing paper, "conduct of a worldwide nuclear command post exercise could show strength of purpose." But the generals have decided that this spring's exercise will be "secret and sensitive."

The spring war game "could be perceived by some as making preparations for the actual use of nuclear weapons and thus acting inconsistently with our position that such exist for the purpose of deterrence," the briefing document acknowledges. It adds that the exercise "could be exploited by certain elements in Europe to increase fears that we are planning for the conduct of a nuclear conflict limited to the continent."

This fear—intensified by President Reagan's injudicious remark foreseeing just such a possibility—is not entirely groundless, sources told my associate Ron McRae. Since the Warsaw Pact nations have far greater ground forces than NATO, U.S. planners do envision "selective releases" of tactical nukes against Soviet armor invading Western Europe. They hope the limited use of nuclear weapons would not lead to a wholesale exchange of missiles.

In fact, however, the scenario for "Ivy League '82" envisions a worldwide crisis, in which "active consideration of selective nuclear release is under way when a strategic nuclear strike is made on the United States" by Soviet missiles.

The command exercise culminates in a simulated nuclear exchange between the two superpowers. So at least in this paper exercise, the Pentagon hasn't abandoned Europe. The alternative of a worldwide holocaust may be of small comfort to our allies, however.